

Bird Bodyguards by Day, Audubon Interns Need a Place to Sleep at Night

By Laura Collins-Hughes

His interns are all lined up, but Scott Hecker has nowhere to put them.

birds, protecting them from vehicle and foot traffic with fencing and signs, collecting information about them and informing the public about them.

Without interns to patrol the beaches, "piping plover nests and chicks are going to be destroyed at a higher rate this year. And terns, too."

— Mass. Audubon's Scott Hecker

Hecker, the director of the Massachusetts Audubon Society's Coastal Waterbird Program, is ready to set his interns to work for the summer, protecting endangered terns and piping plovers on beaches from Scituate to Provincetown. They, likewise, are ready to hit the beach. Missing from the equation, however, are enough volunteers to house them all — and without the volunteers, the program's work is in jeopardy.

"Already the program is greatly understaffed," Hecker says. Without the interns patrolling the beaches, he adds, "piping plover nests and chicks are going to be destroyed at a higher rate this year. And terns, too."

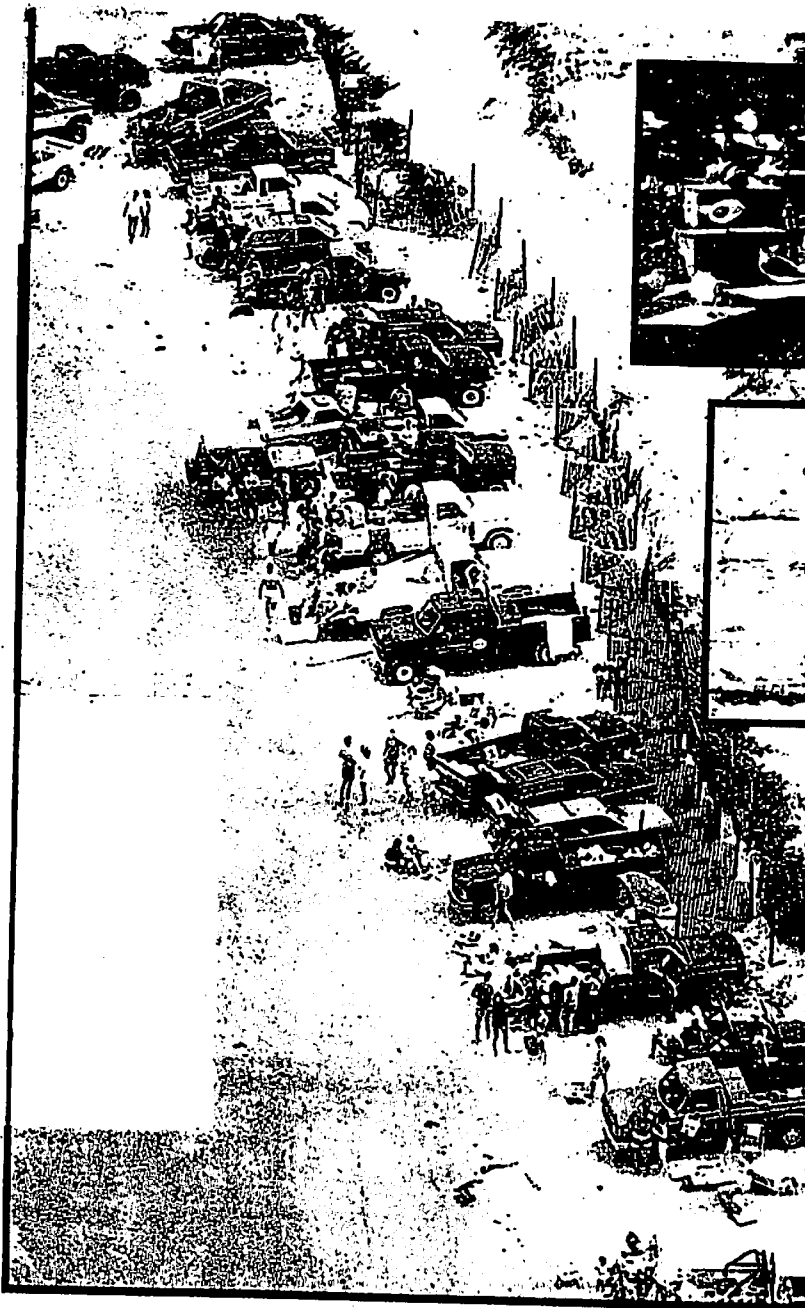
This year's crop of interns, mostly unpaid undergraduate biology students, probably will number 14 if housing can be found for all of them. Even that is a far cry from the ideal number, which Hecker places at 25 — enough to have a single intern working at each beach for the summer, providing a daily presence, watching over the

"Ideally, we would have the interns out on the beaches every day, teaching people about the birds and preventing them from hurting them," he says.



A tern lies crushed in a tire track on the beach.

Although Hecker says he would take 25 interns for the

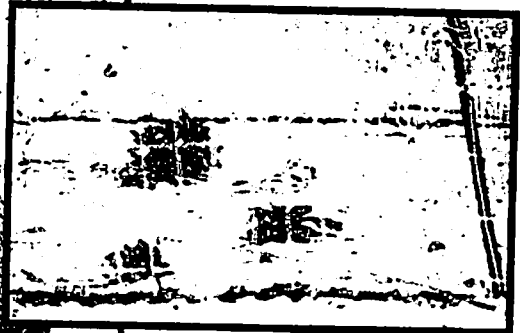


Vehicles line Plymouth Beach in the summertime much the way they do Duxbury Beach.

Photo by Cary Wolford



Numbered nest boxes for endangered roseate terns have succeeded in attracting inhabitants.

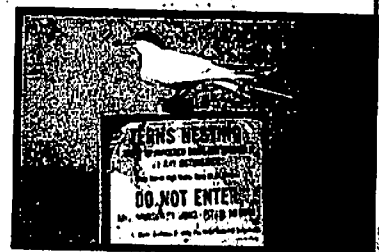


A piping plover nests inside protective fencing called a predator enclosure. Its openings are big enough to let the plover come and go freely but small enough to keep other animals out.

summer if they should apply, that ideal is unlikely to be realized this year. So are some others, like a full staffing level.

"Last year we had money," he says matter-of-factly. "This year we don't."

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The program's \$130,000 budget is down drastically from last year's budget of \$165,000, due, Hecker says, to cuts in state and federal funding.

Without the money — which means, in part, that the program no longer has a full-time volunteer coordinator — its priority during the summer nesting season will be sites with the highest bird population and highest level of local support in funding and staffing. Duxbury Beach, where the harbormaster's office has undertaken an intensive effort to protect birds from beachgoers, makes the cut. Others, particularly on Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket, do not.

"When you don't have fund-

ing, you don't have staff and you're basically exhausted, you have to decide which ones you're not going to help. That's the bottom line," Hecker says. "You know that old lifeboat effect: If I try to save everybody, the whole boat will go down."

For now, he is merely trying to save what he has: the promise of 14 interns willing to walk the beaches each day, watching over his beloved birds. All they need is a place to sleep at night.

Volunteers must provide the interns a room for sleeping and kitchen privileges, starting as soon as possible for a minimum of six weeks. Those interested in volunteering should call Scott Hecker at (617)-834-9661.